‘We Need to Rethink’

By Katherine Mangan  |  NOVEMBER 06, 2016

When Marvin Krislov announced that he would end his decade-long presidency of Oberlin College after this academic year, some wondered whether the college’s recent public battles had taken a toll.

Like campuses nationwide, Oberlin was swept up in a wave of social activism spurred by police killings of African-Americans and a lack of diversity in many student and faculty populations. The progressive, liberal-arts institution in Ohio became a target of critics, who seized on students’ most extreme calls for change and ridiculed them.

When a Vietnamese freshman said in a campus newspaper that a cafeteria had served her an inauthentic bánh mi sandwich, Twitter erupted. And when black students issued 14 pages of demands that included firing specific professors, the backlash was brutal.
Both cases led to constructive discussions and changes, Mr. Krislov points out, but those were largely overlooked in the national news media, while the gibes lived on.

The president publicly challenged the students who had issued the demands for rejecting the prospect of negotiation, but he says he is proud of them for engaging in causes they believe in — and proud of Oberlin’s progress in making its campus more welcoming. He has sought to reassure alumni that while underrepresented students have legitimate grievances, which the college takes seriously, Oberlin is far from a hotbed of unrest.

Debates over race are nothing new to Mr. Krislov, who as general counsel of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor defended its use of race in admissions before the Supreme Court, and as a trial lawyer in the U.S. Department of Justice prosecuted racial-violence and police-brutality cases.

Mr. Krislov thinks 10 years is long enough to lead a campus. He spoke with The Chronicle about current tensions and the pressure on colleges to respond.

Given your personal commitment to diversity, how hard was it to receive such a scathing indictment of your administration from students? Are there any misconceptions about how much a president can change?

There is sometimes an unrealistic expectation that the president or chancellor can solve these problems or issues. One of our jobs as educators is to help students who might want change to understand the way institutions work. In academic institutions, we have this great tradition of shared governance and the important role of faculty in making critical decisions. It’s not surprising that students might not fully understand what that means.

Power may also be decentralized. Colleges and universities are not the same as for-profit corporations, and it’s helpful for students to understand how governance works, talk to people they might want to influence, and then proceed.
Many students want change not only inside the campus, but outside as well, and it’s not always easy to figure out how to accomplish that. In addition to advocacy, research can have an important influence on anything from environmental sustainability to racism to immigration.

**You were praised for how you handled the demands, insisting on a process that included dialogue. What went through your mind as you read the document?**

There’s a national context here. On many campuses, students said that colleges and universities were not responding sufficiently to their needs and concerns. When Oberlin students came up with a list of demands, we weren’t surprised. I had reached out to students before the demands were issued to ask what was on their minds. And of course, we had an ongoing process as well — our strategic plan — which we revised in part due to the concern that we weren’t sufficiently paying attention to diversity and inclusion.

That overlapped with the aftermath of Ferguson and racially charged police activities. When the specific demands came, there were some that I was very sympathetic to, and we were in fact working on, but there were parts that I couldn’t engage with because they contravened some of our principles, including shared governance. I was gratified when students sat down with us after their break and presented some very concrete, specific demands or requests, which we’re continuing to work on.

The events of the last few years have served as a reminder that as demographics change, and as our campuses become more and more inclusive, we need to rethink the way we do some things. That’s partly on the curricular side, partly on the climate side. It’s thinking about populations that may have needs or concerns that we hadn’t really thought about, like issues related to transgender and nonbinary students, undocumented students, and the rise of mental-health concerns.

**What about the critique that today’s students are being overly sensitive?**
Concern over mental health is real. Mental-health professionals would point out that many more students are utilizing our resource centers and coming to campus with challenges, including depression and anxiety. One of the things we’ve tried to do is boost health and wellness activities in ways that can improve students’ ability to deal with setbacks.

I spend a lot of time talking to alumni, often from different generations, and there are a lot of misperceptions about today’s students. As one alum said, if we put down on a sheet of paper all of the silly things we said and did, it probably wouldn’t look that different from what’s happening now. It’s just that because of social media, everything is publicized and exaggerated.

I was in college in the late ’70s and early ’80s, and it was a quieter time. The ’60s may be more like this period, and whether or not you feel the issues were similar, the intensity and emotions are more similar than for my generation.

It is shocking to many people that we are still as a country trying to come to terms with a legacy of racism. People of color rightly are calling on us to do better, and to do better with a sense of urgency.

Our country is in a tumultuous moment, and this election certainly amplifies that. Perhaps it’s naïve, but I would hope that educational institutions could be places where some of the tumult and conflict could be figured out in a civil, thoughtful way. I hope we are open to experimentation and effort that won’t always succeed, but with a goal of trying to find a way forward for broadly inclusive communities.

**When the infamous cafeteria issue came up, you were on vacation with your family in Peru. Are you ever allowed to be off the grid? How did you learn about what was happening?**

My cellphone had pretty good reception, so I got the call when we were on our way to Machu Picchu. I did some of the discussion while we were driving. One of the frustrating things with that story and so many like it is that it’s very hard to break
through with an accurate message of what is really going on.

**How worried were you about the way Oberlin students were mocked?**

I was very concerned when I heard from students who got threats and harsh comments on social media. Sometimes the responses are really unfair and awful, and we can do our part to try to condemn abuses. Unfortunately, social media is an unforgiving platform. Once things are out there, it is very hard to take them down.

We need to educate young people about communication and both the benefits and cost of social media. When things are posted, there’s no analysis or evaluation. What we in education try to do is encourage critical and analytical thinking and understanding both sides and communicating effectively. That’s not necessarily a given in the social-media world.

**Speaking of social media, Facebook posts by Joy Karega, an assistant professor now on leave, prompted complaints that Oberlin wasn’t cracking down on anti-Semitism. You mentioned that, as a practicing Jew, some of whose relatives were killed in the Holocaust, you have strong personal reasons for finding such talk offensive, but you come out on the side of academic freedom. How did that controversy affect you?**

Academic freedom has limitations, and we follow the AAUP guidelines. What one wants on campuses is an exchange of ideas that is respectful and thoughtful and analytical — and that is done in a responsible way. That is not always easy to achieve, but that’s what we’re aiming for.

**What’s it like going through the college-search process with your kids? And do they weigh in on any brewing controversies?**

I have a graduate, one in college, and one taking the PSAT. You really can’t tell kids what to do, and even if you have views, you have to pretty much keep them to yourself. It is kind of fun for me to go on college tours with my children. It’s what my
father used to call a busman’s holiday. I enjoy seeing what other places are doing and saying about the educational experience. I almost never reveal that I have a connection to a competitor college. My kids would be very embarrassed if I did.

They follow a lot of the stuff on social media, so they probably know more than they tell me. My oldest child is good at giving me careful but very perceptive advice on what I’m doing. My middle child is a little less interested in the business of higher education. Everything is public now, so there’s not as much separation between work and family life as there used to be.

**What comes next for you? At 56, you’re far from retirement. Do you plan to continue teaching at Oberlin, or are you hoping to land another presidency?**

I’m considering various opportunities, but I won’t be staying on at Oberlin. I’ve gotten a number of exciting nibbles, and I’m trying to weigh those. Some of them are in academia, and some are not. In a somewhat naïve way, I want to make the world better. What I’m looking for in my next job is a way to do that.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

*A version of this article appeared in the* November 11, 2016 issue.

---

T. Rowe Price Retirement Funds

“...EXCELLENT RESULTS... RELATIVELY INEXPENSIVE PRICE TAGS...” —Morningstar (2/3/16)

Rollover with Confidence®

T.RowePrice®

This ad is supporting your extension Send using Gmail: More info | Privacy Policy | Hide on this page